

Child Should Learn Success is Process, Not Product

by Jim Slempp

Has this thought recently crossed your mind: “I don’t really care so much what the kids end up doing, I just want them to do their best. I’m going to do everything I can to help them succeed.”

Success is an extremely important value in our success-oriented culture, and our children feel the inescapable pressure to succeed. As a parent, what you communicate about the importance of success will largely determine whether your children blossom or buckle in the process of growing up successfully. The key issue is what they decide constitutes success. We’ve failed if they determine success as a person who depends on outward performance. We’ve succeeded if they integrate feelings of success into their own personal sense of worth and identity. In helping your child learn the value of success, here are some guiding principles:

- Be able to see the difference between your need to feel success and your child’s. (“But Dad, I don’t even want to play football!”)
- Increase your child’s opportunity for success by cooperating with her temperament, abilities, and present limitations. (Given a short attention span, practicing music in two 15-minute segments may be better than one 30-minute segment.)
- Praise and punishment is OK, but encouraging your child is even better. Consistent encouragement says, “You’re a neat person to live with. I love you even when you’re not doing anything that is particularly good.”
- Encourage your child to relish and express the pleasurable feelings that accompany success.
- Avoid using the threat of failure to motivate your child. Threats often become self-fulfilling prophecies.
- Help your child experience success in his own way. Cultivate the natural differences between your child and his siblings.
- Guide your child in selecting worthy goals.

In all this, remember that every child has an inborn urge to succeed. Only the very discouraged won’t try to please parents and teachers. Crippling discouragement can be avoided by helping children view themselves as valuable individuals.

For middle-school students, individual and group achievements outside the family begin to take on special significance. Cooperate with this, and stay close to the child. This age student vitally needs strong adult role models to reinforce positive growth and independence. Offer unlimited encouragement to help him or her be a success.

Parents must model the success values they teach. These values are more often caught than taught. Draw your children close enough to you to identify with your own successes and failures, too. Remember, successful living is a process, not a product.

INTERPRETING YOUR CHILD’S EVALUATIONS

Opening your child’s evaluation envelope can be as threatening an experience for you as it is for your child. The evaluations may seem to reflect on your own success as a parent so that you feel

as if you are being graded, too. Yet, teachers and administrators are quick to admit the limitations of the evaluation system. The evaluation process is highly subjective and at times, inconsistent, or unfair. Teachers, after all, are only human. Consider these insights:

Get the broad picture. Evaluations only tell a part of what your child’s teacher has observed. If you have a question or need a conference, schedule one.

Talk to your child about the evaluations. Try to be positive, fair and objective. Focus on future improvement instead of past failure. Get your child’s explanation for drop in performance before assigning blame. Other factors beside lack of diligence might have been involved such as illness, emotional upset or new school setting.

Praise your child, not only for good evaluations, but for characteristics that don’t appear in the evaluation like honesty, generosity and thoughtfulness. If academics are difficult for your child, find other areas of competence to praise. Music, art, sports, mechanical skills or domestic skills are examples. In the long run, these may be more valuable than some academic skills, none of which guarantees success in life.

Don’t automatically assume that the teacher knows more about your child than you do. If the evaluations reflect a picture of the child that is different from your own, try to find out what accounts for the difference in perception. You’re the expert on your child.

Finally, encourage your child to cultivate internal standards of growth and success. Working hard to do what he believes is right and worthwhile is a habit that will last a lifetime.

TIPS FOR TALKING TO YOUNG ADOLESCENTS ABOUT SCHOOL

The following suggestions come from “Talking with Young Adolescents About School” published by the Center for Early Adolescence:

- Talk together every day.
- Learn the meaning of some teen slang.
- Be a good listener.
- Don’t start with a challenge or a criticism.
- Ask some questions that cannot be answered simply by “yes” or “no.”
- Don’t lecture or argue.
- Ask yourself, “What is my child feeling that he or she is not saying?”
- Offer praise and extend help.
- Be honest—support what you feel is good about the school, but also share your concern if you feel that the school’s position and practices are harmful to your child.

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